

Art in America

December 16, 2013

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Moe Brooker

New York, at June Kelly

Walking through Moe Brooker's exhibition, one was overtaken by the abundance of color oozing from the agitated surfaces of his mixed-medium paintings. Ten works of varied sizes on canvas or wooden panels lined the walls. Brooker's signature clusters of abstract shapes are reminiscent of bouquets of flowers seen through the haze of frosted glass. In *On the Backside Somewhere* (2008, 36 by 48 inches), expansive areas of purple and cobalt blue provide room for a profusion of short horizontal marks to sing. The deliberate and controlled parts of his paintings support vibrant floating worlds.



Moe Brooker: *Here and Now*, 2013, mixed mediums on wood panel, 36 inches square; at June Kelly.

Early on in his career, Brooker was influenced by graffiti. Philadelphia, where he lived and worked in the 1960s and '70s, had its share of accumulated tags on the city's faded facades, walls and billboards. He was compelled to translate his experiences into his own visual language.

He builds his paintings by overlapping three to four distinct layers. Hazy swatches of color hover in mid-ground against denser background colors, sometimes applied in stripes, that create landscape-like horizons and give each work an underlying structure. Linear meandering scribbles dance on the surface, like a jazz singer's scats made visible.

His larger paintings (about 6 feet to a side) made a bold impact, but Brooker really seems to have undergone a metamorphosis in his smaller works. *Shorthand for the Real #4* (2013, 15 inches square) and *Here and Now* (2012, 36 inches square) ultimately stole the show with their intense interplays of crowded confetti marks and Cy Twombly-like scribbles. *Shorthand for the Real #4* is a tour de force. Within the confines of this small wood panel, a condensed energy perfectly balances the composition as in none of the larger works. Short black horizontal lines float over a pastel expanse of yellow

Chromophobia be damned; Brooker does not hold back. His paintings of saturated pinks, mellow yellows and lime greens are feasts for the eyes. *Everything Is on Its Way to*

Somehow #2, (2008-09, 72 by 128³/₈ inches) is reminiscent of a wall hanging the artist completed in the early 1990s. The exploration in fabric featured bold color patches juxtaposed with stripes and checkered patterns, and marked a direction he is exploring successfully decades later.

Brooker's artwork expresses an undeniable joie de vivre, but its intent is as serious as that of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43). However, Brooker refutes the reduction of jazz idioms to geometric and metered color play. His paintings employ syncopation, with stops and starts of hue, tone and light in expansive fields, colored bands and irregular shapes. Devoted to a singular vision, Brooker's work is testimony to what can be achieved by sticking with a serial process that has infinite possibilities.

—**A.M. Weaver**